The Pagan Library

Labeling Wiccans

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Hello. I'm the academic that Khaled mentioned. sigh...I've read the thread on definitions and I can see the trouble you have gotten into: prescriptive definition versus descriptive definition. Let me explain: I am currently working in the Dept. of Religious Studies of the University of Ottawa as a graduate student studying contemporary religious movements in Canada, especially women centered or women defined. This, by definition, includes Wicca / Witchcraft / Neo-Witchcraft / Neo-Paganism / Women's Spirituality / Women's Urban(Neo) Shamanism...etc...I'm not the only one there involved in this research (we have an actual "Center for Research in Women and Religion"). We also have a number of women (and one man) researching collateral aspects of the above mentioned religious phenomena. We have had to come to some working definitions so that we can talk to each other and to other religionists.

Personally, I have also had to come up with some minimal definition of Wicca/Witchcraft that I can use as a representative of said phenomena (yes, I am using the plural form) when I am asked to present/explain/ explicate said phenomena to forums such as the Canadian Council of Churches or the Canadian Association for Pastoral Education (CAPE). It is as a result of this need, that I have developed a minimal inclusive descriptive definition that can be used to differentiate Wicca/Witchcraft from other religious phenomena.

What is a minimal inclusive descriptive definition you ask? OK. Minimal = smallest number of characteristics Inclusive = includes rather than excludes Descriptive = what is actually there rather than what should be there (prescriptive) Definition = what can be used to define, i.e. to draw a line around, to know relative to what is left undefined/unknown

I'm using a technique common in Anthropology: componential analysis, i.e. the identification of discreet analytical features (components) that can be seen as occurring or not. A set of these which minimally defines something is seen as its descriptive paradigm. A descriptive paradigm is unique in that it can only be used to define the phenomenon it describes and no other. OK? Just so you know what kind of language I'm using.

Yes, I consider myself 'Wiccan'. No, I am not a member/initiate/follower of any specific 'tradition'. I'm too much of an anarchist at heart for that, and anyway, how can I swear secrecy if my only stock in trade as an anthropologist is the knowledge I have gained by experience? Sort of defeats the purpose, doesn't it?

OK. So here goes...Relative to any other faith system, Wicca/Witchcraft (I won't separate them yet) can be minimally defined as consisting of these five necessary components:

1. faith system is nature based
2. divinity is conceived as inherent
3. divinity is apprehended as gendered and as minimally female
4. the locus of decision is the individual
5. the locus of action is the individual in the present

What does this mean? Remember, this is to distinguish this faith group relative to any other type of faith group. It does NOT include variations, only COMMONALITIES.

1. nature based: as far as I can tell, all forms of Wicca/Witchcraft (WW for short?) are based on humans being part of and in nature rather than apart from. Also, seasonality and elements (air, earth, water, fire) are central to the human apprehension and interaction with nature.
2. divinity is inherent: divinity has manifested in all that is, all that is an aspect of divinity, we are all manifestations of divinity...
3. divinity gendered and female: divinity in one of its most apprehensible forms knows itself in the specificity of gender and that gender is at least female "The Goddess". All groups, whether they acknowledge the God or not, know divinity in its female form.
4. locus of decision: morality is a personal, individual thing and responsibility for choices is also a personal, individual thing. No one can (successfully) impose a set morality on any one else. Ostracism seems to be the only -effective- means of moral coercion used by adherents to this faith. Its the other side of "Do what thou wilt, An it harm none" and the Law of Karma. If a person acts contrary to the community norm, this person will be shunned, ostracized, severely criticized, and may as a result, leave the community. No matter the behavior which the community wishes to refuse to accept, the individual will not be 'punished' or told that they may not continue to behave in their chosen way. Again, even community norms (and community may be read as 'tradition') cannot be imposed or dictated. Even in oath bound traditions, oaths are taken freely and as freely adhered to or broken.
5. locus of action: nothing is differed to the 'ever after', nor is the past fully responsible for what occurs in the present. This is it, this is all there is for anyone, make the most of it. Again, no predestination, no fatalism, no 'heaven' or 'hell', this is not a prelude.

Secondly, no congregation, no group, no church, no polity has any more importance and certainly far less immediacy than the individual as the believer and the definer of what is believe. Faith is lived within the individual, as an individual.

OK. Remember, this describes ONLY what all forms of WW share, NOT what differentiates them from each other or what is defined within a tradition as what constitutes the whole of THEIR tradition. It is a minimal, inclusive, descriptive definition...(part 2 follows)

Whew...So what use is this type of definition? It allows me to compare WW to other faiths such as Christianity, Shinto, Islam, etc. It allows me to talk about beliefs and practices without getting mired in the specificity of traditions. It also allows me to speak of Gardenarians and Dianics in the same breath. They have more in common relative to other faiths than they have different relative to each other...

I was asked what defined WW relative to other Pagans and to nature based faiths such as Shinto. It took some thinking but I think I've been able to do it:

WW is

1. focused on the human (rather than nature or divinity)
2. divinity always takes a human form (at least)

3. WW works according to principles (fundamental underlying realities which inform behavior)
4. WW is law driven (there is a 'right' or 'proper' way...) 5) believers need to rationalize and to make scientific their faith (just think of tables or correspondences and our explanations of 'why it works')

I was also asked what distinction I made between Pagan, Wicca and Witchcraft. I do make a difference.

Pagan: from paganus (Latin) for of the country side as opposed to "civitas" of the city

Neo-Pagan: post 196o's revival of country cum nature based spirituality -seen in opposition to Christian/Mainstream church -logical spiritual outcome of the 'back to the land' and 'experiential experimentation/mystical quest' of this same era

Witchcraft (revival): British phenomenon dating from the 1950's. Wicca is used in Gardenarians texts but not used as a lable of the faith group or practice. Wiccan NOT used.

Wicca/Wiccan: preferred terms adopted by many North American developed Traditions of WW to differentiate themselves from British Traditions (Gardenarians, Alexandrian)

Witch/Dianic: terms of self definition used by many North American women to acknowledge their mythopoethic/political reclaiming of woman centered / woman defined spirituality. Often expressed as: Women were burned as witches in the Middle Ages, well, I'm a witch and you're NOT going to burn me! May or may not express the adherence to a specific tradition (Reclaiming, Dianic (Z. Budapest), etc.) but is always an indicator of woman centered / woman defined experience and self definition.

Neo-Witchcraft: all forms of contemporary Anglo (i.e. of English language, not an ethnic or nationalistic lable) witchcraft to distinguish from Ancient, Middle Eastern, Medieval, or non-European forms

Wicca versus Witchcraft: as it seems to be used by most people today. Wicca is a type of religion and witchcraft is a technology (i.e. spell crafting, craft of the wise, nature magic...)

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